

DONALD ERIK CHANDLER

Personal and Professional Life Stories

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“SAKAMOTO!”

– Don Chandler

DON CHANDLER

A Unique Individual

What does a twenty-five foot long great white shark named 'Bruce', a forty-foot tall gorilla, the Pillsbury Doughboy, a 30,000 year old sandworm, the Hamburglar, a thirty-foot tall Witchiepoo Castle and a pick-up truck load of human bodies have in common? Read-on in this brief life story of one Donald Erik Chandler – an extraordinary creative artist and fascinating human being – to find out

This is a collection of stories of a unique individual. In addition to the facts, some now decades old, these stories include recollections by family, friends and colleagues, 12 years after his death. One of his closest friends and neighbors, Pierre Veres, said of him "I have never met in my entire life another man like Don Chandler."

A modest and humble man who, for most of his professional life, worked behind-the-scenes for some of Hollywood's greatest – and brought their dreams and aspirations to life. In his body-of-work are creations that have touched the lives of many millions of people worldwide. Some are the scariest beasts ever while others are soft, warm and cuddly.

Don Erik Chandler (May 5, 1922 – August 4, 2005) was Uncle Don to me – although technically speaking we were second cousins. But no matter, he was Uncle Don to many; especially young men who were trying to get their heads screwed on right and move on with their lives.

In this compilation information on family history, childhood and early adulthood experiences, and professional education – that likely influenced the person he would become later in life – are shared. School transcripts, military service records, family photos were reviewed and many family, friends and colleagues were contacted.

His specific contributions to the motion pictures, television and commercial arts and sciences are many. However in his day 'credit' was not widely given to people who actually did most of the hands-on work. Eye-witness accounts, old newspaper and trade articles in addition to information from sources such as the Internet Movie Database (IMDb) were used to help identify Don's contributions.

Don did much of his professional work at home – and so his home life is an important reflection of not only the man but also the artist. Don and his wife Ruth created a special home environment that they graciously shared with the many people that came to visit – all leaving feeling they were special and greatly appreciated, regardless of their looks, beliefs or politics.

In light of today's modern world dependent on advanced technology, Don's professional accomplishments deserve even greater appreciation. Using simple tools and techniques of his own design, decades before computers were to become the 'go to' instrument for special effects, he created incredible characters, who to this day, retain iconic stature worldwide.

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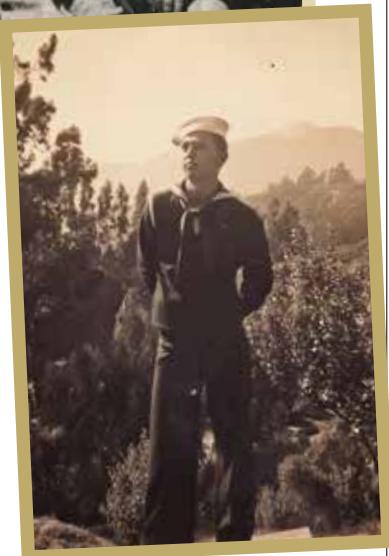
FAMILY HISTORY

Early 1900's through World War II



↑ Pete, Don, Ray (with pipe) and Hanna – circa 1924.

→ Don early-on during his Navy years with Mt Tamalpais in background – circa 1942.



Don's father, Percy (Pete) Chandler, was born in Liverpool, England on August 9, 1884 – one of four brothers – Fredrick, Harold (my grandfather) and Kenneth. The Chandlers were a seafaring family. Sometime around 1910, Percy jumped-ship in Los Angeles, California.

Don's mother, Hanna Klingwall, was born in Horndal, Sweden on July 16, 1889. As a single young woman, Hanna sailed to the United States with her brother Eric (he eventually settled in Fontana California) – arriving in New York in 1909. She had befriended a group of young women on the voyage and they decided to go to Chicago to find work. She and her newfound friends did not like Chicago and decided to take a train to Los Angeles, hearing there were jobs as well as a mild climate there. They arrived in August with a nickel between them all. Hanna went right to work doing hand-laundry for a Swedish woman, Miss Hemmingson, an acquaintance of her aunt who had worked in Los Angeles earlier before returning to Sweden.

Although the details of their meeting have been lost, Don's parents were married in Los Angeles on March 20, 1915. Sometime between their marriage and the birth of Don's older brother Ray in 1918, the family moved to San Francisco. Don was also born in San Francisco on May 5, 1922. Sometime in the mid-1920's the family moved across the Golden Gate to Mill Valley, California. Don's father, Percy, supported the family as a retail grocer for most of his working life.

Don attended Tamalpais Union High School. There he made a life-long friend, John (Jack) Gardner. Both Don and John served in the Navy during World War II and after the war received two-year degrees in Sculpture from the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts (PAFA) in Philadelphia (under the GI Bill). Both were destined to create icons of American culture.

It was somewhat a taboo subject to bring up Don's experience during World War II. All that is really known is that it was traumatic and had a lingering impact on Don through the rest of his life. To help answer some of these questions about Don's service, his records were obtained from the U.S. National Archives and Records Administration.

Don was accepted for enlistment in the U.S. Navy on June 7th, 1942 and was honorably discharged on December 18, 1945. He served on the USS Bunker Hill, an Essex-class aircraft carrier, from the time the ship was commissioned (May 25, 1943) to June 27, 1944. During much of that period of time the ship was involved in active combat. From June 19 – 21, 1944, while in the Marianas, the record shows the Bunker Hill was in a “major engagement with large Japanese Carrier Task Force”. During this engagement the ship was bombed, 2 sailors were killed and 80 wounded. It appears from these records that Don likely suffered significant trauma during this attack. After taking a leave he was reassigned stateside for the remainder of his service

Nancy Champlin, Don's niece, said the one time Don opened up a bit on what happened he described how they had to sweep detached body parts overboard. Don's brother Ray told Nancy that after the War – “he was really bad off”. It seems highly likely that Don suffered from Post Traumatic Stress Disorder – something that would likely reoccur in stressful moments during the rest of his life.

Don's archived records do contain glimpses of his character and what his destiny would be. While stateside Don served five days in solitary confinement for the following offense: 'Gave McCoy his chow pass to get chow knowing he was on commuted rations.' On another form filled out by Don he lists his specialized training, vocational, technical trade as: '4 mos, art course, nudes.'

Post War through early 1960's

PROFESSIONAL EDUCATION AND TRAINING

Transcripts from Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts in Philadelphia (PAFA) show that Don attended Corcoran School of Arts and Design in Washington DC and San Francisco State College. PAFA records and a family photograph document he attended the 1947 summer session of the Art Students League in Woodstock, New York. It appears returning World War II veterans were encouraged to signup for these summer art sessions to help them heal from the trauma of war.



↑Don and high school friend
John (Jack) Gardner – circa 1943.

→ *Don, Art Students League summer session, Woodstock, NY 1947.*



↑ *Don, Stewardson Prize winner in sculpture, Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts 1949.*

In the fall of 1947, Don started at PAFA and earned a two-year certificate in Sculpture under the GI Bill. He was the Stewardson Prize winner in 1949, a prestigious annual competition in sculpture that still exists today at PAFA. This is a timed competition – a full-length figure from life in the round, between 2 ½' to 3' tall, must be made within 18 hours, over three consecutive days, in six sessions of three hours each. A panel of three judges, not affiliated with PAFA, selected the winner. Working efficiently with time constraints was a skill he would later put to good use in Hollywood.

One of the judges selecting Don's entry was Clara Fasano – a well-known woman sculptor, a rarity at that time. Works of hers can be found in the Smithsonian American Art Museum in Washington DC, Syracuse University and National Academy Museum, New York. In 1939 she created a bas-relief entitled "The Family" as part of New Deal Federal Arts Project for the post office in Middleport Ohio.

Coincidentally, or possibly with some encouragement from Fasano, Don obtained his Bachelors of Fine Arts from the School of Visual and Performing Arts at Syracuse University in 1951.

In the mid 1940's Don's family became settled in Southern California – particularly in the City of Whittier, east of Los Angeles. In the late 1950's and early 1960's Don attended classes at Los Angeles Trade Technical College, a California community college. Don sought out people with skills and abilities that impressed him, regardless of how prestigious (or not) the institution they were affiliated with was considered at the time. Don's niece Nancy Champlin says that Don felt the instructors at LA Trade Tech taught him some of the most useful skills he would build upon in Hollywood.

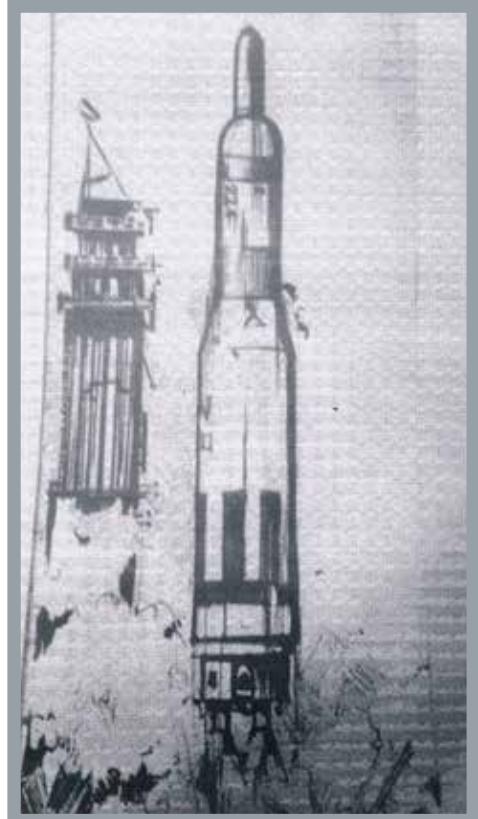
Until about 1962, Don lived with his parents house on Canobie Avenue in Whittier California. Cynthia Krumm, sister to Annamae Chandler who married Don's cousin Glen Chandler (my father) recalls a story while she and her would-be husband Roland were visiting Don at Percy and Hanna's house: "Don was showing us all the many art works, recalling his years at school etc. Roland saw a small black hawk figure and jokingly asked "Can I buy this from you?" Don smiled. "No. Sorry". I never saw it again all the many visits thru the years". Don is known to have kept many of his miniatures, especially some of his most famous works, for years. After retiring he sold many of these pieces to collectors.

In the early 1960's Don took a job as a technical illustrator with a Defense contractor, North American Aviation, to work on what became the Apollo program. The ambitious goal of the program, as declared by President Kennedy in 1962, was to land a man on the moon before the end of the decade. Illustrators were important to convey not only information to the public on what the program was about, but also to communicate concepts between the many teams of people working on this massive project.

It was while working at North American Aviation, Don met the woman who would be his wife and partner, Ruth Kading. They were married in 1962 – and remained married until Don's death in 2005.



↑Don and Ruth's wedding, September 1, 1962, at the home of Glen and Annamae Chandler.



↑Technical Illustration by Don, while employed by North American Aviation, of what would become a Saturn V rocket liftoff to the moon in the early days of the Apollo Program, circa 1963-64. (Illustration belongs to Robert Champlin Jr.)

“Don and Jack were always very quiet about the work they were doing. Both were super sculptors!”

– ARMANDO BAEZA

→ *Don and his life-long friend John (Jack) Gardner at Hanna and Pete's 50th wedding anniversary party in Whittier, CA – circa 1965.*

John (Jack) Gardner – Master Sculptor and Lifelong Friend

As mentioned earlier, Jack Gardner's relationship with Don dated back to at least high school in Mill Valley, CA in the late 30's and early 40's and continued to the time of Don's death in 2005. Both Don and Jack joined the Navy. Jack joined right after Pearl Harbor and remained in the service until 1947. He served as a photographer and film producer, filming the effects of two atomic bomb blasts at Bikini Atoll.

Don and Jack both attended the Pennsylvania Academy of Fine Arts. Both were award winning and highly regarded students in sculpture. Jack and his family returned to Northern California in 1960 and eventually settled near Santa Rosa. After his return, Jack was retained by Mattel to design and develop many Barbie and Ken and associated dolls, as well other artistic accomplishments. Nancy Champlin, Ruth's niece, remembers visiting the Gardner's house when she was young: "There was an entire bedroom full of dolls that Jack had created."

Don and Jack also did some freelance sculptures together for Hollywood early in their careers according to Armando Baeza – himself a well-respected sculptor – Whittier resident and friend to both Don and Jack. "I went over to Don's house for a visit and there they were working together." He went on to say: "Don and Jack were always very quiet about the work they were doing. Both were super sculptors!" Jack Gardner died in January, 2015 at the age of 91.



EARLY WORK

TV and Commercial

Mid-'60's through 1972

Although there were some lean times in this era requiring Don to do small odd jobs to keep afloat (for instance he worked for my Father doing construction and office remodeling), it was also a time for him to land some jobs of note and further develop the techniques that would serve him well the rest of his career.

Pillsbury Doughboy

The Doughboy – known as Poppin' Fresh – was originally the idea of Rudy Perez, a copy writer for Leo Burnett Advertising Agency in Chicago working on the Pillsbury account in March, 1965. He and designer Milt Schaffer (who also worked for Disney), created the original character for commercial use that Cascade Studios in Los Angeles used for stop-action clay animation.

The rest of this story is what I remember as a young teen sometime in the mid-60's. I believe I heard it both from Don and Ruth but it's too long ago to remember exactly.

The original Pillsbury black and white Poppin' Fresh commercial was first aired in 1965. Although considered a successful launch in a historical sense, "the powers-that-be" at the time appeared to have thought the original character was 'lacking'.

How this all came about is unclear but somehow Don got involved to refine the original Poppin' Fresh. In so many words, I heard that the Pillsbury people thought the character did not exude enough 'warmth and friendliness' and asked for ideas on how to improve upon the character. If you look at the original Doughboy you'll notice that he is without a neckerchief. This was Don's contribution to the character, as I recall.



↑The original Doughboy in the first 1965 TV commercial without a neckerchief.



→ A Doughboy promotion doll – the mold for which was sculpted in the early 1970's by Don. He is believed to have developed the neckerchief soon after the original launch to create a more likeable character (doll belongs to Nancy Champlin).

Years ago, Nancy remembers Aunt Ruth telling her that she was the first to poke the Doughboy in the belly with her finger – the iconic act of making Poppin' Fresh giggle!



↑ The 30-foot tall Witchiepoo Castle.

Nancy Champlin also told me an interesting story about the Doughboy. Don and Ruth were together at the animators studio (Cascade Studios seems the likely place) watching the stop-animation work being done with Poppin' Fresh. Nancy says someone asked Ruth to 'poke the Doughboy in the belly'. Nancy believes that Ruth's hand was the first to do this iconic act of making Poppin' Fresh giggle!

Later, in the early 70's, Don was asked to sculpt a clay miniature of the Doughboy for a Pillsbury promotion. A mold was created and according to nephew Robert Champlin, the original miniature was destroyed in the process. Nancy Champlin has one of the Doughboy dolls produced from Don's miniature.

Krofft Brothers – Banana Splits and H.R. Pufnstuf

In the mid to late '60s, according to Robert Champlin, Don did a lot of work for the Krofft Brothers – Sid and Marty. The Krofft's were retained by Hanna-Barbera to design the costumes and sets for the TV show The Banana Splits. Mixing both live action and animation, the show was seen on NBC on Saturday mornings debuting in September, 1968 and continued until September 1970. The Banana Splits were 'dog-and elephant-like' characters who were a rock band. Don is believed to have played a role in their creation.

The Banana Splits show was considered a success and paved the way for the Krofft's to launch, in August 1969, their own Saturday morning show 'H.R. Pufnstuf.' It was while creating 'Witchiepoo Castle', a 30-foot tall, complete with dungeons, witch's head entrance and tongue drawbridge over a moat that Don started to refine his technique of sculpting foam. Don started this creation using a reciprocating saw with a 12" blade. He then refined the detail work with a hand knife and heavy grade sandpaper. At the time, Don was quoted as saying: 'The tools created one of the happy accidents you stumble across when experimenting with techniques. I had no precedents to rely on, so I tried various methods. The knife cuts gave the exact appearance in the foam of cut stone. And when the latex coating was applied you'd swear the castle was real, even close up.'

There is no record whether Don also worked on the Pufnstuff characters themselves. However his commercial work with McDonalds hints that this was quite possible – and may have been a contributing factor in a lawsuit.

McDonalds – Ronald's Supporting Characters



Ronald McDonald was first seen in commercials as early as 1963 – played by Willard Scott (of NBC Today Show fame) – who later claimed he had a hand in creating the character. About 1970, McDonalds wanted to create supporting characters for product promotion and use as playground equipment for McDonaldland – installed at McDonalds around the country.

Both myself, Nancy and Bob Champlin remember Don being asked to take blueprints and create/sculpt miniature clay

models. Nancy Champlin commented "The characters as drawn were not kid-friendly at all and were downright scary!" As history shows, Don could go 'both ways' creating some of the most adorable as well as the most frightening characters ever. For the former, he made a big effort to create characters that most kids would love at first sight, and for some, adore for a lifetime.

The characters developed for McDonalds by Don debuted in 1971. They include The Hamburglar, Grimace, Mayor MacCheese, Officer Big Mac, Captain Crook, The Fry Guys and The Hamburger Patch. Don was involved in creating both characters and playground equipment

McDonalds big push with these characters and some similarities in feel and in form (Mayor MacCheese was said to be a dead-ringer for Pufnstuf) resulted in the Krofft Bros. suing McDonalds for copyright infringement. The Krofft's alleged that McDonalds had approached them about developing the characters, discussed certain technical aspects, but then never followed through. When the characters debuted the Krofft's felt ripped-off. After a lengthy legal fight the Krofft's prevailed and McDonalds was ordered to pay a \$1million settlement.

↑→ Some of
the McDonald's
characters
developed by
Don, 1971.



↑Don created many of the playground equipment characters for "McDonaldland" at McDonalds across the USA.



↑*Robert Champlin Jr. modeling a costume in his backyard created by Don for the TV movie "The Gargoyles" in 1972.*

Now, over four decades later, the details of what actually transpired have been lost. There is no known direct evidence that Don was used as the vehicle for McDonalds to go around the Krofft's to get the characters brought to life. Today, some see an obvious connection while others do not. However, some of Don's McDonalds characters have grown in status over time. For example the Hamburgler is portrayed as a Hipster kind of guy and a favorite Halloween costume. They also have great sentimental value amongst those who were kids in that era, even showing up for appraisal on Antiques Roadshow on PBS.

The Gargoyles – 1972 (TV Movie)

This low budget horror film, produced for CBS, is on the verge of 'cult status', especially among the '50-something' viewers that remember it as being scarier than heck, as well as being very good for its time. The movie starred Cornell Wilde, Jennifer Salt and Bernie Casey with voiceover by Vic Perrin (Star Trek and Outer Limits fame). It was filmed at Carlsbad Caverns in New Mexico. The movie won a Prime Time Emmy in 1973 for Outstanding Achievement in Make-up.

Not only was this a low budget movie overall, it was a 'backyard studio' family creation for Don, with Ruth and other family assisting including yours truly. Don sculpted, molded, poured, trimmed, assembled and painted the elastomeric/rubber-like parts of the gargoyle costumes. I remember a next morning deadline looming and staying up most of the night to do the final assembly and painting.

Don told me after the fact that he thought about getting me a part in the movie as a gargoyle but thought better of sending me to the desert to run around in a rubber suit. Luckily for Nancy Champlin – she was able to wear one of the gargoyle costumes for Halloween – winning first prize in the school costume competition two years in a row!

PRIME YEARS

Motion Pictures and TV

1973 through 1988

During this period of time, Don was very busy and in-demand. He must have felt he had realized his long-held dream to be a professional sculptor. As luck would have it he was in a 'sweet spot' era for his services. Here, in chronological order, are the productions we know Don was involved in during his prime working years.

The Naked Ape – 1973

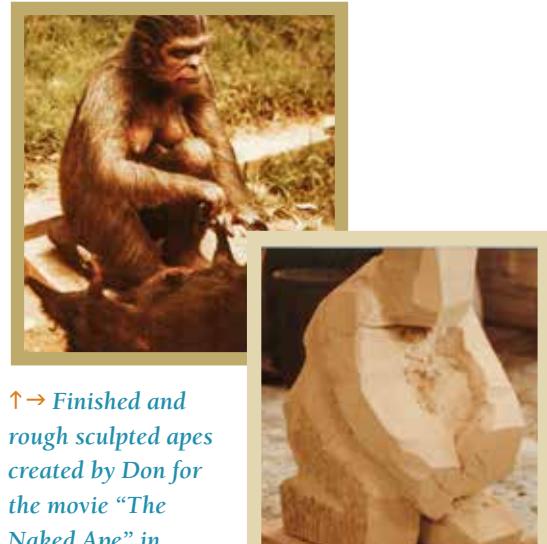
This film stars Johnny Crawford, Victoria Principal and Dennis Oliveri, is directed by Donald Driver and Hugh Hefner was the Executive Producer. Don and Ruth were invited to its World Premiere at the Regent Theatre in Westwood in August of that year. Family pictures show the origins of ape-like creatures being created out of foam. An article in "Graphic Arts News" in the late 1970's state that Don also created ten clay models that were not cast for this movie adaptation of the 1967 book written by Desmond Morris.

Scream Pretty Peggy – 1973 (TV Movie)

This made-for-television horror film was about an aspiring artist who works as a housekeeper for the reclusive Mrs. Elliott (Bette Davis) and her oddball sculptor son Jeffrey (Ted Bessell). This Universal Television production for ABC combines elements similar to the movies 'Sunset Boulevard' and 'Psycho'. According to W.M. Maatita (the-jaws-blog.blogspot.com) Don worked with Art Director Joe Alves to create life-size monsters of the Norman Bates type character Jeffrey Elliott.

Herbie Rides Again – 1974

This Walt Disney Productions movie, directed by Robert Stevenson and starring Helen Hayes, Ken Berry and Stefanie Powers is one of six sequels made about the mind-of-his-own Volkswagen Beetle. The story is about a mean-spirited developer, Alonzo Hawk (Keenan Wynn) who wants to build a shopping center but is foiled because of one landowner, the widow Mrs. Steinmetz (Helen Hayes), who will not sell. Don sculpted the two gilded hawks at the entrance of Hawk's headquarters: Alonzo A. Hawk, Wrecking and Building Corporation.



↑→ Finished and rough sculpted apes created by Don for the movie "The Naked Ape" in 1973.



↑ Anne Chandler, married to Don's brother Ray, with the gilded hawks sculpted by Don for the movie "Herbie Rides Again" – post production circa 1974.



↑→ Don gets local press for his work on "Jaws" in the Whittier Daily News, August 5, 1975.



↑At the early stages of sculpting 'Bruce', the 25 foot great white shark for "Jaws", from foam using a reciprocating saw with a 12 inch blade.

Jaws – 1975

Again according to W.M. Maatita, while working on "Scream Pretty Peggy", Joe Alves was working on charcoal sketches for "Jaws". He was being challenged by Universal Pictures to create a realistic monster shark for a film based on a story written by Peter Benchley. Universal bought the film rights to the story prior to the release of the book in 1974.

It did not take the Universal people long to figure out that filming a movie about a great white shark terrorizing a New England island town had some major technical hurdles. At first their naivety lead them to believe they could hire a trainer working with a live animal, much like dolphins or killer whales at Sea World, to do the scenes. They soon realized that was not a viable option. Thus since the 'star' of the film may never materialize, it appears Universal attempted to distance themselves from the effort in case it failed and would not provide space for Joe to attempt the job on their lot.

In fall of 1973, Joe approached Don and asked if he might be interested in sculpting a 25 foot long great white shark, but there was a glitch. According to Don's good friend Gunnar Ferinandsen, whose specialty was moldmaking, union rule issues would arise regularly if you were hired as a sculptor. Both he and Don were members of Union Plasters Local 755. For non-union productions it appears that the terms "Special Effects" or "Make-up" were used to circumvent these rules. After the work description finagling was complete, Don took on the challenge.

Don focused on sculpting the most realistic great white shark possible. He worked with renowned special effects men Bob Mattey and Roy Arbogast who were responsible for making Don's creation come-to-life mechanically.

Steven Spielberg, 27 at the time, directed the movie. It is well known that the sharks, named Bruce after Spielberg's lawyer, were very 'uncooperative' primarily because the mechanical systems used proved to be unreliable, if not down right dangerous in the coastal waters off Martha's Vineyard. Spielberg, as well as people in the industry, thought the shark issues plus many other miscues, (159 days on location, cost over-runs, etc.) could ruin his career.

Knowing he was not going to accomplish his original concept with the troublesome sharks, Spielberg came to the question "What would Hitchcock do?" From Hitchcock's point of view the answer was clear – "Its what we don't see which is truly frightening". Less time on camera for the sharks, script improvements and comic relief from Carl Gottlieb ("The Odd Couple" and "All in the Family" fame) and the haunting music of John Williams started

Spielberg on his way toward creating the first summer blockbuster of all time. Even with less footage, he needed a shark that would elicit the response from moviegoers he was wanting. Spielberg can give some thanks to Don's work for accomplishing that.

Don dedicated time researching great whites before starting the sculpture phase. He studied to get the mouth, teeth and bite as spot-on as possible. Nancy Champlin remembers "Don watched a lot of video footage of great whites feeding, watching how their teeth came forward and eyes rolled back when biting. He wanted to make that as realistic as possible". Don also had real great white jaws shipped to him so he could study them firsthand.

Don spent three months creating the original shark for Jaws. He used his now well-refined technique of sculpting foam with a reciprocating saw and finishing the work with knife strokes and sanding. From one sculpted shark three molds were produced which in turn produced three sharks made of elastomeric material that were used for filming. Kevin Pike, who at the time didn't know Don personally, was on location at Martha's Vineyard and remembers when the sharks arrived in their molds.

A fourth shark, made of fiberglass from Don's original, was used to promote the movie. After that, the shark spent 25 years outside at Alden Brothers Auto Wrecking in the San Fernando Valley until 2016. It was donated to Academy Museum of Motion Pictures by Nathan Alden and shows that over time values can change. From junkyard to museum!

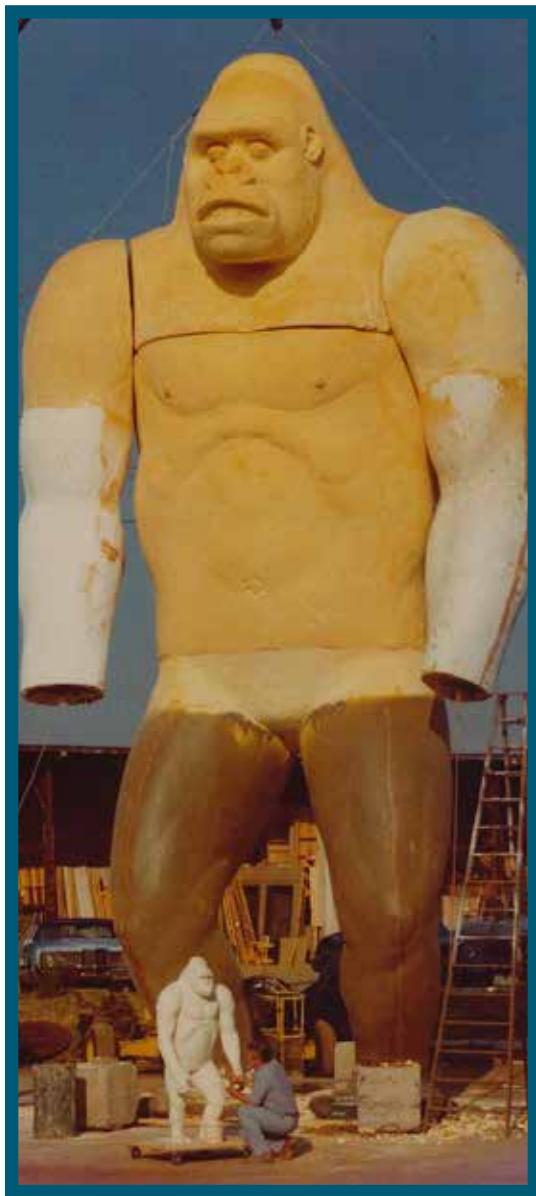
For Don's effort to create the great white shark for Jaws, he was reportedly paid \$3,000 in 1975. In equivalent present day dollars this would be about \$12,000. A bit more math – if Don ONLY put in 40 hours a week he would have been paid around \$25/hour for his effort today.

It is very likely that Don created clay miniatures and even scale models as precursors to the full size shark creation. Kevin Pike believes this is how Don would have approached it. WM. Maatita believes there are at least three documented "maquettes" of Bruce the shark that Don created. Nancy and Robert Champlin also remember a shark model measuring about 5 feet in length. Nancy states: "There is a newspaper picture of it with my brother standing next to it somewhere. The small Jaws was sculpted out of clay, then a plaster of Paris mold made, then poured foam. Don did not keep the model of Jaws after he made it. It must have gone to the studio." It seems possible then that a Jaws model or mold could still exist somewhere. Don or Ruth could of also have sold any miniatures from Jaws to collectors after Don retired.

Ultimately Spielberg took a 'Hitchcock' approach to creating the movie "Jaws" – "It's what we don't see which is truly frightening". Still he needed a shark that would elicit the response he was wanting. Spielberg can give some thanks to Don's work for accomplishing that.



↑Nancy Champlin with the pilot whale Don sculpted for the movie "Jaws". In the movie Quint harpoons the whale and uses it as chum for the great white shark – 1975.



King Kong – 1976

This production, directed by John Guillermin, adapted from the 1933 screenplay by James Creelman and Ruth Rose by Lorenzo Semple Jr. and produced by Dino de Laurentiis, required the creation of the largest mechanical/animated sculpture ever built. It also required the talents of several people including Carlo Rambaldi, Rick Baker and Don Chandler as sculptor of Kong.

Kong was 40 feet tall, weighed over 6 tons. He had over 1,000 pounds horsehair from Argentina, over 3 tons of aluminum in his frame, 3,000 feet of hydraulic hose and almost a mile of electric wiring. Kong's total cost was \$1.7 million.

The movie starred Jessica Lange, Jeff Bridges and Charles Grodin. A recently divulged footnote is that Dino's son, Federico De Laurentiis brought in Meryl Streep in to meet his father to be considered for the leading role and commented to his son, in Italian, in front of Streep that she was not attractive enough for the role. It was a bit of a surprise to both men when Streep responded – in Italian.

Don, with a crew of five, sculpted Kong in three spray foam over wood frame sections. From there he used basically the same techniques he perfected on earlier projects such as "H.R. Pufnstuf" and "Jaws". Don also sculpted a one-seventh scale model of the gigantic Kong. According to a August 25, 1976 article in the Whittier Daily News, both large and small Kongs were used for filming. Don is quoted as saying "In the movie, the camera cuts from one to the other so they must be identical." In the same article he was asked if working with monsters really made for bad dreams? Don's reply was: "The only recurring nightmare I had was that I wouldn't make the deadline."

History again is not clear whether Don created smaller clay miniatures to scale up from for both the 40' Kong and one-seventh scale model. Again, Kevin Pike stated that is how Don worked on many, if not all, his major projects.

Nephew Robert Champlin says he remembers seeing Don sculpt 2-foot high models out of oil clay, from which he believes the resin production models were given to VIPs. W.M. Maatita also states that 23 inch models exist with a typed note at the base that reads

← *Don with his 40 foot tall Kong and one-seventh scale model creations, 1976.*

“Original Scale Model King Kong – Sculptor Don E. Chandler.” The family photo shown of Don holding the same model appears to substantiate that he did sculpt the original.

The sculpted face of Kong impressed many and had magnificent detail for a work of such size. In the same Whittier Daily News article cited above, Don comments that the personality of Kong was always factor; “Kong is more than just a gorilla. It has a man’s emotional qualities in the movie, a definite character.”

Many friends and family were used as unpaid extras to film large crowd scenes. Don’s niece, Nancy Champlin, said that although impressive to look at, the 40-foot Kong had limited mobility. These shortcomings were addressed in part by using facial masks with different expressions and animation. On-camera time for Kong was supposedly only around 12 seconds – due in part to these limitations

The great Kong and the terrifying great white of Jaws were great and masterful creations, especially when one realizes they started as a block of foam that was then shaped and refined with very simple tools. However, Kong and Jaws signaled the end of an era and were the last of their kind on such a grand scale. Their shortcomings, the public’s craving to see more monsters, and (sometimes outlandish) special effects set in motion a wave for widespread adoption of computer animation.

→ *Don with a 2 foot King Kong used for promotion of the movie. The miniature was used for magazine and newspaper photos with lead actress Jessica Lange. Don sculpted the original out of oil clay.*



Kong and Jaws were masterful creations, especially when one realizes they started as a block of foam shaped and refined with very simple tools.



↑ *Nancy Champlin with the head of ‘Small Kong’ – 1976.*



↑ Guests looking at dioramas before making their selection of which world to explore in “Futureworld” – 1976. Don created this work in the backyard shop of his good friend and fellow sculptor Armando Baeza.

“Someone from Hollywood came to inspect the dioramas... I told them to go to my father’s shop in the backyard but to watch out for the monkey. The person gave me a look like ‘yeah right! I heard the monkey and the sound of complete surprise...”

– RAUL BAEZA

Futureworld – 1976

This science fiction thriller movie is directed by Richard Heffron and is the sequel to the 1973 film “Westworld” directed by Michael Chrichton. “Futureworld” stars Peter Fonda, Blythe Danner, Arthur Hill and a cameo appearance by Yul Brynner (his last before his death).

The movie revolves around an entertainment park offering several themes in which the guests are immersed: Spaworld, Medievalworld, Ancientworld and Futureworld. These worlds, however, are not what they appear and involve unscrupulous use of robots and theft of genetic material from guests.

Guests circle around a large set of dioramas at the entrance of the park to help select the world they wish to explore. Don created these dioramas. The work was done in the home studio of his good friend, fellow Whittier resident and distinguished bronze sculptor Armando Baeza. Robert Champlin remembers: “Don paid me to help make parts for the dioramas. It was a lot of work because of the short deadline, but lots of fun!”

Armando’s son, Raul, remembers “Someone from Hollywood came to our door to inspect the dioramas at dusk one day so I told them to go around and through the backyard to my father’s shop – but to watch out for the monkey we had back there. The person gave me a look like ‘yeah right!’ and headed back to the studio. The monkey loved to startle people by swinging on branches as people walked by. Sure enough I heard the monkey and the sound of complete surprise from the person.”

The Big Bus – 1976

This movie probably illustrates best that special effects cannot compensate for a movie that lacks a story. Yet there are those who believe, nevertheless, it is destined to become a cult classic. Directed by James Frawley, it has many cast members of note including Joesph Bologna, Stockard Channing, John Beck, Jose Ferrer, Larry Hagman and Lynn Redgrave.

A disaster parody similar to Airplane (but four years prior) is of a nuclear powered bus going non-stop from New York to Denver (even the destination is supposed to be a joke) when multiple disasters strike.

One of the kindest comments made about this movie was published in the magazine Bus World: “Fortunately, Hollywood has usually favored people who get things done and let traditional methods fall where they may. So without an art department concept and without any kind of engineering drawings... respective heads of Construction and Special Effects Departments started in.” In this ‘get’er done’ effort, the bus is equipped with outrageous amenities such as swimming pool and bowling alley and whatever the crew thought would be worth a laugh.

Again Robert Champlin remembers Don’s involvement. Kevin Pike, a Special Effects artist for the film, believes Don was involved with creating the outside panels of the massive bus – created by joining together two fifty-five foot long truck cab and chassis.

Logan's Run – 1976

Set in the 23rd Century all is good in an idyllic but short run world where life must end at the age of 30.

Directed by Michael Anderson, starring Michael York, Jenny Agutter and Richard Jordan. The movie had many special effect features. Both miniature models and elaborate sets are heavily used.

Kevin Pike recalls overhearing Don in casual conversation that he worked on Logan’s Run with crew of later productions. Bob Champlin also remembers Don’s involvement as well, but no specifics are known.

Islands In The Stream – 1977

Adapted from Ernest Hemingway’s novel of the same name, directed by Franklin Schaffner and stars George C. Scott, David Hemmings and Gilbert Roland, it is the story of a man who seeks a simpler life in the Caribbean just before World War II

Roger Ebert wrote about the movie: “Islands in the Stream” is a big, strong, old-fashion movie about that threatened species, the Hemingway Hero. It celebrates physical courage and boozing all night and initiation of boys into manhood, and it has a fishing scene, a battle scene, a love scene and a whore with a heart of gold. Papa would have loved it, and no wonder: He wrote it, and in many ways it’s about him.”

“Don sculpted a 26 foot long sailfish and a 13 foot hammerhead shark for “Islands in the Stream.” He was rushed to get these works done before a pending writers’ strike would shut down all movies that weren’t yet in production.”

– KEVIN PIKE

“I do remember that we delivered them (the bodies) in a standing position inside a metal framework in the back of Don’s pick-up. Many weird looks from passers-by.”

– ROBERT CHAMPLIN JR.



↑ Bodies created by Don for the movie “Coma” – 1978.

Kevin Pike, who was a special effects assistant for the movie, listed what were Don's contributions to the movie: “Don sculpted a 26 foot long sailfish and a 13 foot hammerhead shark. Don was rushed to get these works done before a pending writers strike would shut down all movies that weren't yet in production.”

Kevin Pike said he and Don got to know each other during lunch breaks during this production effort. Don was very interested in beekeeping at the time and talked of the health benefits of bee stings with Kevin. This small talk grew into a strong friendship over the years.

Coma – 1978

“Coma” is a suspense film based on the 1977 novel by Robin Cook. It was Directed by Michael Crichton and stars Michael Douglas, Genevieve Bujold, Rip Torn, Richard Widmark and new-face Tom Selleck. A young doctor, played by Genevieve Bujold discovers an unnatural number of comas occurring in otherwise healthy people and uncovers the truth.

Don created the coma patient bodies that were eerily suspended by wires in the storage room – an iconic image from the movie. Robert Champlin described a moment he shared with Don: “I do remember that we delivered them (the bodies) in a standing position inside a metal framework in the back of Don’s pick-up truck. Many weird looks from passers-by.”

C.H.O.M.P.S – 1979

Directed by Don Chaffey, starring Wesley Eure, Valerie Bertinelli and Conrad Bain, and a Hanna-Barbera production, “CHOMPS” is an odd kid movie about a young man who invents bionic dog with superhero power. He has x-ray vision and can detect crimes as they are being committed.

According to the Graphic Arts News article about Don's professional career at the time: “Chandler sculpted the terrier-cockapoo ‘wonder dog,’ complete with interchangeable heads and a supporting cast of six equally mechanical Dobermans.”

Supertrain – 1979 (TV)

In the Graphic Arts News article about Don mentioned above, it states: “The most expensive set built for television also fell into the hands of Don Chandler. His \$2 million

mock-up of a transcontinental train starred in “Supertain,” authentically whizzing along with nine coaches and a locomotive engine.” This NBC television show had very elaborate special effects – a nuclear powered, wide-bodied train going from New York to Los Angeles was said to go 190 mph and boasted luxuries like a swimming pool, discotheque, a shopping center and movie theater.

The show was created by Earl Wallace and Donald Westlake and starred Edward Andrews, Harrion Page and Robert Alda. The show began in February, 1979 and lasted only three months before the network executives pulled the plug. It was very expensive to produce and when the models crashed they were too expensive to replace.

The Incredible Shrinking Woman – 1981

This production starred Lily Tomlin, Charles Grodin and Ned Beatty. Directed by Joel Schumacher, it is a story of when an ordinary woman is exposed to a unique mix of chemicals causing her to shrink uncontrollably.

Both Roy Arbogast and Kevin Pike were involved with special effects for this movie. Kevin states: “My understanding is that staff shop (at Universal Pictures) under Steve Spencer brought Don in to do the large props.” Amongst those large props that Don worked on was the ‘blue-plate’ – a famous scene with Tomlin.

The Thing – 1982

Directed by John Carpenter, starring Kurt Russell, Wilford Brimley and T.K. Carter, this movie opened opposite “ET” and received less than stellar reviews. With the passage of time, it is now considered by many as one of the top horror films of all time. It’s scary because it’s impossible to know which of the characters you can trust because an alien parasite imitates humans very, very well.

Don was hired by Academy Award winning special effects designer Rob Bottin. He, along with long-time friend and colleague, Gunnar Ferdinandsen, would be part of a very large special effects crew of 37 people. What Don created specifically for “The Thing” is unknown – but many of the special effect creatures are reminiscent of the work he did for “Scream Pretty Peggy” in 1973

*“The most
expensive set built
for television
also fell into the
hands of Don
Chandler...”*

— GRAPHIC ARTS NEWS



↑ Model train created for the short-lived 1979 NBC TV show “Supertain”.



↑ Don creating the Sarlacc in the 'bowels' of Jabba's Sail Barge, on-site in Buttercup Valley, CA.

Return Of The Jedi – 1983

"Episode VI – Return of the Jedi" starring the legendary actors of the Star Wars series: Mark Hamill as Luke Skywalker, Harrison Ford as Han Solo and Carrie Fisher as Princess Leia. Directed by Richard Marquand and the Executive Producer was George Lucas with music, of course, by John Williams. Don worked on several special effect elements of this film with a seven member crew – many of whom he had worked with for years including, Roy Arbogast and Kevin Pike.

According to Kevin, he and Don spent a lot of time together on location with "Jedi". Before the the entire filming crew arrived, they went to Northern California Crescent City area to set-up for the shoot. In addition to helping Kevin set-up a Scoutwalker, Don also carved a thirty-five foot tree trunk half-round out of foam as a prop but Kevin believes it was edited out of the final footage. Don also created rocks out of foam that the Ewoks hurled at the Stormtroopers.

In the evening there was time to kill at the Crescent City location. Kevin says he and Don got to be regulars at Jim's Restaurant, an out-of-place white linen tablecloth establishment. At the end of a long day they had their regular cocktails: Manhattan for Don and Martini for Kevin. They played lots of card games and Don read poetry.

At the Buttercup Valley desert filming location (in California but near Yuma, Arizona), Don sculpted the Sarlacc (family called it the sandworm) – an awful creature 30,000 or more years old which would bury itself deep beneath the surface and create a loose, steep catch pit – much like an ant lion would. Jabba would have enemies thrown into the pit – C-3PO translated for Jabba "In its belly, you will find a new definition of pain and suffering as you are slowly digested over thousand years."

According to Kevin the Sarlacc was sculpted in plastilina clay (non-hardening) from which a silicon mold was made. Latex and foam appendages were added and operated by hand with wires. According to a couple of sources Lucas was not totally happy with Don's version and, when the movie was re-released in 1997, had a beak and other effects added via computer imaging. Nevertheless the original Sarlacc is a cult favorite to this day.

Jaws 3-D – 1983

“Jaws 3-D” was directed by Don’s colleague Joe Alves and starred Dennis Quaid, Bess Armstrong, Simon MacCorkindale and Louis Gossett Jr. As with the original “Jaws,” Don worked with Roy Arbogast in special effects.

A supersized great white (35 feet in length) becomes trapped in a SeaWorld theme park in Florida and the sons of Chief Brody must protect the citizens. I visited Don on location in Orlando in 1982 during the filming of this movie. As opposed to open-ocean filming at Martha’s Vineyard in the original Jaws, this movie made use of a 5 million gallon steel tank to film the footage needed.

While the shark bodies of the original Jaws were used for this movie, Don sculpted a new ‘monster head’.

The movie was poorly rated at the time of release but more recently has garnered more favorable reviews in the ‘campy’ genre.

Moonwalker – 1988

Starring Michael Jackson (who also has writing and executive producer credits) Joe Pesci, and Sean Lennon – it is a story of Michael’s confrontation with a ruthless drug dealer known as Mr. Big (Pesci). Kevin Pike was special effects supervisor for the film.

Some say Michael Jackson’s brilliance is evident by his interest in transforming himself into a sleek and fast moving machine, almost two decades before release of the first ‘Transformers’ movie in 2007.

Kevin Pike shared that he hired Don to create a series of four clay miniatures of Michael Jackson transforming into a F14 Tomcat fighter. “Don’s segway from one clay model to the next was fantastic!” says Kevin. But, alas, Jackson went with the now famous transformation to an Italian sports car, believed to be a replica of a Lancia Stratos.



↑Don, Robert Champlin Sr., and assistant Ernesto looking at great white shark jaws shipped in ice to Don’s backyard studio in Whittier, CA 1982.



← Dolphin sculpted from foam in the Whittier backyard studio for “Jaws 3-D” – 1982.



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DON AND RUTH AT HOME

Stories of Friends, Family and Colleagues

In the process of trying to 'get the facts right' on Don's early life, all the work he did over his years in the studio/etc., I realized that one of the most important parts of his story was about life at home. Don did a considerable amount of his creative work while at home. However, his impact on others while home is as important, if not more so, than what he created in the studio. Furthermore, it is impossible to discuss life in that setting without talking about both Don and Ruth.

Don and Ruth lived in a very modest house on Canobie Avenue in Whittier CA, circa late 1920's. Home improvements over the years, mostly done by Don and Ruth themselves, were 'eclectic' to say the least. As their friend and colleague Gunnar Ferdinandsen put it "The house was always under a state of remodeling". But what the house looked like was not important – it was how Don and Ruth made you feel when you came to visit.

For Nancy Champlin, whose mother Ruby (Ruth's twin sister born on the kitchen table in Casey Iowa, June 29, 1926) died in 1988 from cancer when Nancy was a young adult, Don and Ruth's house was a haven. She shared with me "Aunt Ruth so beautifully became my surrogate mother...Uncle Don was caring, interested, and easy to talk to. They both made me feel important and loved." That love did not start and end with people of their own family – they extended it ALL who entered that humble little house.

Don and Ruth's home was likened by several their friends to a revolving door. Nancy went on to say "There wasn't a day that passed without someone, if not several people, coming for a visit. Friends and family alike were always welcomed with smiles, food, drinks and undivided attention, coupled with great conversation. No judgments ever; only friendship was offered. People felt special around them, like you were the only person in the world that mattered at that moment." Neighbor and friend Pierre Veres agreed; "Don and Ruth always made me feel good."

There was only one day of the week when your reception might be a little tepid – and that was Sunday during football season. You would be allowed to come in but Don's eyes would be on the TV. If you were into football, great – just don't expect a lot of incidental conversation.

"Friends and family alike were always welcomed with smiles, food, drinks and undivided attention, coupled with great conversation. No judgments ever; only friendship was offered."

– NANCY CHAMPLIN

Don and Ruth would carefully clip out printed articles and put people's names on them they thought would enjoy them and, eventually, mail them to the intended recipient. But there often was considerable delay. I myself received articles more than 30 years after they were published!

Another attribute of this household, especially in the current era of strident political rancor, was not just a willingness to tolerate people who had opinions on issues different than their own, Don and Ruth thrived on it. Don's life experience shaped him in ways such that he saw himself as part of something bigger than a city, state, country or political party. He would sign letters to me with his name followed by statements such as "Citizen of the Planet."

He never hid that this was his point of view but he was close with people who could be considered his political polar opposite. My father, Glen Chandler now in his 90's (Don's cousin), has been a Republican most of his life. He was very close to Don and Ruth and vice-versa. They, as many of Don's family and friends, had ways to diffuse their political differences. It wasn't taboo to talk about differences, but they used subtle techniques to divert tension and then laugh about it. Both men called each other 'Chandler' and sometimes discussions might start 'Listen Chandler...' They also loved to call each other, in a tongue-in-cheek fashion, and pose as a famous person, con man or both. For instance, Don might have called my father posing as Richard Nixon (also a Whittier resident) during the Watergate hearings saying something like this: "Ah Mr. Chandler, Dick here. Things are heating up and I might be out of a job soon. Was wondering if Pat and I could use your back bedroom temporarily if I need to relocate in a hurry?" In the end both men would laugh. My father said recently: "I really miss doing those type of things with Don."

And then there was the dining room table. Not only was it for eating and entertaining it also served as library, workshop as well as a place to work while listening to the radio. In front of most of the chairs around the table there were cleared areas (more like slots) where you could put your glass or plate, but the stack of papers or whatever around you could be hovering over your head. When reading, Don and Ruth would carefully clip out articles from newspapers, magazines and newsletters and put people's names on them they thought would enjoy them and, eventually, mail them to the intended recipient. But there often was considerable delay. I myself received articles more than 30 years after they were published! So things would pile ever higher on that dining room table for a very long time. Pierre Veres, an accomplished machinist and very organized person commented: "My son, Richard, is messy because of Don and that table!"

Not too long after Don and Ruth were married in 1962, both in their early 40's, they tried to have a family and Ruth became pregnant. The baby went full-term but there

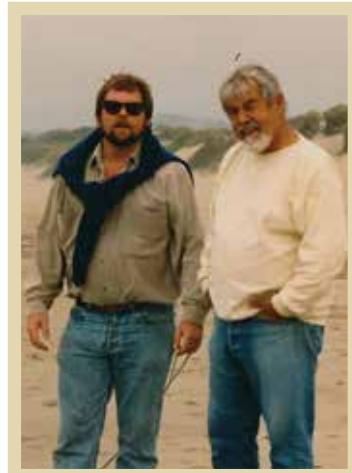
were complications at birth and the baby died. Similar to his war experience, Don would never discuss this loss in his life. My point in sharing this here is that I suspect this tragic event likely contributed to how they went on with their lives, treated and enjoyed other people as they did.

Over the years Don would work on the interior and exterior of their house – drawing on his skills as a craftsman and years of work experience. Often, he would hire young guys (I don't know of any young women) to work on some of these projects. He did this, not only to use their brawn, but also to share some of his expertise, and maybe a bit of wisdom interspersed as well. I can think of many young men that Don impacted this way myself included. Occasionally, he would hire young men to work on projects in his studio – which were often hard but memorable. Kevin Pike remarked that he witnessed Don playing that role in Hollywood or on location as well.

One little gimmick Don did for years as an ice breaker mainly with kids and teens – but a few unsuspecting colleagues I suspect – was the coin trick. Don would take out a penny or a dime, rub it between his hands and it would magically disappear. In the next move he would reach up to your head and pull the coin out of your ear. Many, many kids' eyes bulged with delight when he did that trick, making him do it over and over again to try and figure out how it was done. As far as I know he never divulged that secret to a soul.

I began this life story with a quote from Don: "Sakamoto" What is Sakamoto you might ask? The definition has variations and is a bit nuanced, but a short answer will suffice here. Don was an enormously creative guy, who never shied away from tackling big and never-been-done-before type of projects. As with any effort that stretches the boundaries, there were plenty of failures along the way. But when things started falling into place or there was a breakout moment of some kind, Don would verbally release his enthusiasm, sometimes in a karate stance, by shouting 'Sakamoto!' He did this at home and at work as well. Kevin Pike remembers Don use of Sakamoto and a phrase he would state when things weren't going so well: "Oh Pike, it's a Terrible Burden!"

Part of the generation that lived through the Great Depression of the 1930's, both Don and Ruth had strong beliefs about food. Not long before his death in 2005, Don shared with me how he couldn't fathom someone spending six bucks for a burger. After Don had passed and Ruth lived in an assisted living home she often commented about the amount of food wasted there.



← Kevin Pike and Don at Pismo Beach, CA 1983.



↑ Pulling the 'coin trick' on Kong. Don would find a coin that had disappeared by magic from his hand in an unsuspecting person's ear. He performed that trick for decades with kids and occasionally adults.



↑ Jeff Chandler with Don in summer, 2005.
According to Ruth this was his last photo. I asked
him what he was proud of during his life? His
answer – “never having to work a boring job.”

→ Wil
and Cailin
Chandler
(and Okapis)
with Ruth in
the front yard
of Canobie
Avenue, 2007.



Kevin Pike also shared stories about Don and food on location. Kevin says “Don loved coming to certain jobs more so than others if they had good coffee and donuts”. He continued “When we were working on “Return of the Jedi” north of San Francisco I took Don to dinner at a Japanese restaurant for sushi. Don had never had sushi before and was downing them left-and-right. Don really enjoyed them but then asked how much they were and when I told him when he was in mid-bite he spat the sushi out! From then on it was a joke we used about expensive eating referring to it as ‘A Buck A Bite’.”

Don and Ruth put on their share of feeds, sometimes with the help of Don’s mother Hanna (who had her own catering business at one time – Swedish Meatballs were a regular of hers) or with help from his brother, Ray, and his wife, Ann. A particularly memorable meal for my folks, Glen and Annamae, was when Don and Ruth made paella over a driftwood fire on the beach one evening, showing frugality and good eating could go hand-in-hand!

Regardless of all his other great attributes and skills, Don remained a sculptor and an artist until the day he died. He embellished his yard with many hardscape things like sidewalks and retaining walls, fake stones, etc. They were great training projects for young men at the time and neighbors like Pierre Veres who were eager to learn new skills.

My absolute favorite yard creation of Don’s was an eight feet tall by approximately 2 ½ feet diameter ‘Tiki’ – a hominoid plaster creation in Hanna and Pete’s front yard. Don and Ruth decided to fence in more of the front yard and wanted to move the Tiki to near the sidewalk. I remember rolling the heavy creation maybe 100 feet or more on pipes and poles with pry bars, and getting it upright on a mound Don had built. The neighbors watched in amusement. Don one day decided he was tired of the Tiki and demo’d it. The neighborhood was up in arms “Why did you do that?... it’s the landmark I use for visitors to find my house!”

Ruth also enjoyed creative pursuits. She took classes at nearby Rio Hondo College, especially in woodworking. Her projects that adorned the house included furniture and kitchen items.

Don and Ruth would come to my folk’s mountain cabin in the San Bernardino Mountains for visits. Some ‘working vacations’ found Don doing such things as laying a block foundation (Don was very talented at slapping mud and annoying black flies

simultaneously) while at other times he would be sculpting figures in the snow or sketching.

Kevin Pike got to know Don and Ruth very well after befriending Don on the job site after Jaws. “He had deep character – one of a kind” Kevin told me. “I would call him ‘Chandler’ and he would call me ‘Pico’; a tongue-and-cheek reference to Pio Pico, the last Mexican Governor of Alta California in 1846 and whose rancho once included half the land of Whittier. Don was Kevin’s Best Man when he got married in March, 1991. After that they would do ‘couple things’ like camping in the Sierra. “On more than one occasion we froze our butts off during those trips.”

Kevin also mentioned how impressed he and other Hollywood people were by Don’s artistic talents and ability to focus while working. “Don could draw a perfect circle freehand! Messing around with his tools or disrupting his organization was a no no.”

Kevin’s favorite dessert is peach cobbler and Don and Ruth would make it especially for him. When Don died from prostate cancer in 2005, Ruth gave Kevin a book of poetry of Don’s – in it was a bookmark. Don had scribbled things he needed to get done on the bookmark – one said ‘make cobbler for Pico’. “It really got to me seeing that, it still does today”.

Ruth adapted to life without Don living almost eight years – several in an assisted living home in Whittier until her death on July 2, 2014. She continued to build many, many friendships on her own until the day she died. Brian Ohno, a high school friend of mine whose own mother was in the same home and was also befriended, became close with Ruth as well. He, his wife Sandy, and other family members continued to visit Ruth well after his own mother had died. Ruth’s niece, Nancy, told me “At Ruth’s Memorial I was told by the Director of the home that Ruth had the largest group of workers, caregivers and residents requesting to attend her service ever.”

Don and Ruth were both humble people who enjoyed the company of others in their home, and impacted many with their openness and caring. Ruth was a great support person for Don and all the fantastic projects he immersed himself in over his life.



↑Ruth and Evelyn Ohno at Posada in Whittier, CA – Christmas 2009.

Family and Friends in this Life Story

(in order as they appear)

Pierre Veres – Neighbor and longtime friend of
Don & Ruth

Hanna & Pete Chandler – Don's parents

Ray & Anne Chandler – Don's brother and
sister-in-law

John (Jack) Gardner – High school and life-long
friend of Don and fellow sculptor

Nancy Champlin – Don and Ruth's niece.
Her mother, Ruby, was Ruth's twin sister

Glen & Annamae Chandler – Don's cousin (my father)
and wife

Cynthia & Roland Krumm – Annamae's sister and
husband

Armando Baeza – Whittier resident, long-time
friend and fellow sculptor

Robert Champlin Jr. – Don's nephew and Nancy's brother

Gunnar Ferinandsen – Longtime friend and moldmaker
in Hollywood

Kevin Pike – Longtime friend and Special Effects Supervisor
in Hollywood

Raul Baeza – Friend and Armando's son

Robert Champlin Sr. – Nancy and Robert Jr.'s father

Richard Veres – Friend and Pierre's son

Wil & Cailin Chandler – Jeff Chandler's son and daughter

Brian & Sandy Ohno – Ruth's friends. Brian is a
longtime friend of Jeff Chandler

Evelyn Ohno – Ruth's friend, Brian Ohno's mother

Don was an “unsung hero” (headline from a late 1970's news article) who was the ‘go-to’ guy for many in Hollywood because of his hands-on skills and the fact that he did not demand high compensation or much public recognition. He created iconic characters that, to this day, are known to millions around the world. Raul Baeza, whose father Armando (still an active sculptor) was a good friend of Don's said “For all his achievements in movies and TV he was still just a regular guy,” and Raul is right. Now would be a great time for Don, as well as other behind-the-scenes and ‘unsung heroes’ of the era, to get a bit of well-deserved recognition for their many creative contributions to Hollywood.

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank all the family, friends and colleagues I connected or reconnected with to write this life story. Through the process new information was discovered, mysteries were solved and questions I had about Don and Ruth's life were answered. Special thanks goes out to Nancy Champlin and Kevin Pike for their input and encouragement.

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“Jaws 3-D”, 1982.

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